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SUBJECT: KYRGYZ MEDIA: WHO'S PULLING THE STRINGS AND WHY

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Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution.

11. (U) This is the first in a series of cables on the state of the media in Kyrgyzstan, with additional cables covering Internet news agencies, broadcast media, National TV and overall analysis to follow.

12. (SBU) BACKGROUND: The Kyrgyz media and political scene have become closely intertwined. A few politicians have become owners of news agencies simply to propagate their message. At the same time, editors and media moguls have gained positions within the government, seats in the parliament, and have developed their own political parties. The degree of influence over the local media by Kyrgyzstan's elite has grown exponentially in recent years, swaying popular opinion about various politicians or their parties. This is evidenced by the fact that many government officials, legislators and businessmen openly or secretly back a particular brand of media.

13. (SBU) Under former President Askar Akayev, some independent media outlets were closed down starting in the mid-1990s, while others seemingly flourished until the final two years of his administration, when authorities utilized the courts, tax inspectors, the National Security Service and other state agencies and institutions to fine, close or harass certain news agencies critical of the government. Since the "Tulip Revolution" in March 2005 that ousted Akayev, several news agencies have emerged to compete in the growing market, while others, clearly critical of President Bakiyev, have fallen victim to similar forms of persecution from the authorities, both publicly and covertly.

14. (SBU) Nearly all media outlets are politically motivated or influenced to some degree. However, none seem to be staunch allies to the U.S. or consistently favor USG policies. Russian-language news agencies utilize or republish international news articles and information directly from the Russian press. Contrarily, the

Kyrgyz-language media shows less interest in international affairs and, therefore, uses the Russian press far less frequently. Ultimately, the media has become a weapon of choice in the battle between opposition leaders and the Bakiyev regime as both sides attempt to mold popular opinion.

The state of government-owned television was a key point of disagreement between Bakiyev and the opposition during the week-long street demonstrations in early November. It will continue to be an issue; the state-run TV station is the only one in Kyrgyzstan with national coverage. As the government consolidates its powers under the new constitution, further attempts to control the media will be vigorously pursued.

END BACKGROUND.

#### PRINT MEDIA SUMMARY

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15. (SBU) SUMMARY: With several hundred newspapers registered around the country, many of which are weekly along with two dailies, the Kyrgyz public is offered a wide variety of perspectives, opinions and reporting styles unheard of in many neighboring countries. Although Kyrgyz is the official language, Russian-language publishers far outnumber those printing in Kyrgyz, and advertising revenues follow the circulation; many of the small newspapers have a circulation of less than 500. Some papers profit from their ad sales, while others carry no advertising but rely solely on the financial backing of politicians, businessmen and international donors to stay in business. END SUMMARY.

#### RUSSIAN LANGUAGE DOMINATES THE PRINT MEDIA

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#### VECHERNIY BISHKEK

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16. (SBU) By far the largest of papers with a readership of over 100,000 per week, Vecherniy Bishkek is the only Russian-language, daily newspaper in Kyrgyzstan. Privatized by its employees after the fall of the Soviet Union, it has become the most profitable newspaper in the country due to its robust advertising department. In 2001, then-President Akayev's son-in-law, Adil Toigonbaev, seized control of the paper through an illegal purchase of the company's stock. It was not until August 2005 that Alexander Kim, who was fired from his post as editor-in-chief after the takeover, regained ownership of Vecherniy Bishkek after a successful court fight. Once revered for its reputable articles, the quality of reporting of late has deteriorated and the political slant clearly expresses support for Bakiyev, to whom Kim has been close from the days when they were both on the outs with Akayev.

#### MSN

17. (SBU) Alexander Kim is also the editor/owner of a second paper, MSN (Moya Stolitsa-Novosti), through which he aggressively supports Bakiyev. In its prime, MSN distributed approximately 50,000 copies per week. Kim has shifted his focus away from MSN and towards Vecherniy Bishkek as it continues rapidly to expand. With control over two of the largest newspapers, Kim is one of the most influential media voices in the country. MSN is strictly focused on political and social issues but contains no advertisements. The proceeds from the numerous ads in Vecherniy Bishkek support the publication and distribution of MSN. MSN, one of the few color newspapers, is printed by the Freedom House printing press. However, Uchkun, a state-owned printing agency that recently purchased color presses, may be splitting the monopoly of color printing previously held by Freedom House.

#### OBSHESTVENNIY REITING

18. (SBU) Obschestvenniy Reiting, a weekly Russian-language newspaper, targets a small, highly educated readership with a

circulation of less than 3,000 copies. Founded by three owners of Tolubai Bank, Bolot Maripov, Aibek Chekoshev and Jengishbek Baigutiev, the paper gained credibility for its compelling interviews with leading politicians and economists together with its analysis from local researchers on politics and the economy. In post-revolution 2005, Maripov became a member of parliament while Chekoshev and Baigutiev were appointed advisors to Bakiyev, resulting in a steady decline in articles critical of the government (and a corresponding loss of readers). Of late, the editors have again shifted their policy back to a neutral stance on the local political scene, which may attract their core readership back to previous levels.

#### SLOVO KYRGYZSTANA

¶9. (SBU) Founded in 1925, the government-owned Slovo Kyrgyzstana is by far the oldest of newspapers, starting out as the publication of the Communist Party of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic. This Russian-language paper, with a circulation of up to 15,000, is a mouthpiece for the Kyrgyz Government to criticize the opposition. From 2003 until March 2005, Slovo Kyrgyzstana featured numerous anti-American articles, often attacking the U.S. Ambassador personally. After the revolution, the newspaper's editor-in-chief was promoted to advisor to the prime minister and its editorial policy quickly changed direction, criticizing the newly formed opposition.

#### DELO NOMER

¶10. (SBU) Most popular of weekly newspapers among the Slavic community, Delo Nomer is a well-respected, marginally independent paper with more than 30,000 copies distributed throughout the country. The Russian-language newspaper is

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famous for its investigative reporting but also known for its pro-Russian and anti-American articles. Delo Nomer has operated under various degrees of independence but, most recently, has returned to its roots of analytical and balanced reporting. Viktor Zapolskiy, formerly with the Freedom House printing press, is the owner/editor of Delo Nomer.

#### KOMSOMOLSKAYA PRAVDA

¶11. (SBU) Komsomolskaya Pravda, Kyrgyzstan's supplement to the Russian version, is also distributed nationwide with a readership of up to 15,000 people. Askar Aitmatov, former Foreign Minister under the Akayev regime, took over ownership in 2005 after he was dismissed from office immediately following the March revolution. The subject matter and editorial pieces are somewhat balanced but tend to lean towards support for the opposition. The newspaper is popular among the general public due to the Russian version's tabloid format.

#### KYRGYZ LANGUAGE A DISTANT SECOND IN POPULARITY AMONG PAPERS

#### AGYM

¶12. (SBU) Agym is the most influential of Kyrgyz-language newspapers with a circulation of 15,000 to 20,000 copies distributed twice a week. The paper is owned by journalist-turned-politician Melis Eshimkanov, an opposition leader who had warmed up to President Akayev until he realized that speculation of him being named the State Secretary was unfounded. Eshimkanov was one of several

#### SIPDIS

opposition activists leading the November 2 demonstrations that called for Bakiyev's resignation, and reports from Agym reflect the owner's disdain for the president. Due to numerous shifts in allegiances, some view the

politician/editor as unpredictable.

#### ALAS

¶13. (SBU) The most recent addition to the print media scene and quickly gaining popularity against Agym is Alas, which has built a circulation of over 10,000 copies since its inception in November 2005. The paper was founded by independent journalists who left other news agencies in pursuit of a writing environment with fewer restrictions and controls. Tugolbai Kazakov, the editor-in-chief, previously served as the president of National TV and Deputy Minister of Culture. It is rumored that Bolotbek Sherniyazov, the pro-opposition parliamentarian, is behind Alas, which would explain the paper's support for the opposition movement "For Reforms".

#### JANGY ORDO

¶14. (SBU) President Bakiyev welcomes the extremely one-sided reporting of Jangy Ordo, a Kyrgyz-language publication with a twice-weekly circulation of about 5,000 that praises the president and criticizes the opposition. Popular in the rural areas, especially in Bakiyev's native southern Kyrgyzstan, the paper is affiliated with the Jangy Kyrgyzstan Party and its leader, Usen Sydykov. Sydykov, the former Chief of Staff within the President's Administration and current advisor to the president, along with several pro-government parliamentarians, ministers and other influential public figures all openly support the newspaper's slanted reporting.  
YOVANOVITCH